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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies conditions in the lives of poor urban high school students that may cause classroom management problems. Urban student teachers are urged to look at these conditions from a humanistic perspective to help them understand their students and deal effectively with those problems. Specific urban secondary classroom management problems are identified, and strategies for handling these problems are offered. Humanistic teaching means pupil-centered teaching that recognizes students as individuals, respects their differences, and tries to help them in their personal, social, emotional, and academic lives. The real difference between urban and suburban high school classroom management rests with events happening outside the classroom. The problems of students who may have to work, or who may have no time for homework, or a place to do it, or whose lives may be disrupted by homelessness or family problems, must be recognized by the urban teacher. Motivating poor urban minority students with low self-esteem to strive for academic excellence is a serious challenge for student teachers. The core of strategies for solving the problems of urban students is promoting self-esteem. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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Urban High School Classroom Management: A Humanistic Approach

by

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Abstract

Urban High School Classroom Management: A Humanistic Approach

This article identifies conditions in the lives of poor urban high school students which may cause classroom management problems. Urban student teachers are urged to look at these conditions from a humanistic perspective to help them understand their students and effectively deal with those problems. Specific secondary urban classroom management problems are identified and strategies for handling those problems are offered.

Urban High School Classroom Management: A Humanistic Approach

Unless colleges or universities are located in urban areas or their missions include urban areas, most secondary teacher education programs do not usually focus on urban teacher education. Most secondary teacher education programs provide preservice teachers with a variety of generic instructional techniques which many teacher educators believe are applicable in all situations. Few secondary teacher education programs offer preservice teachers any type of urban classroom management training. While instructional techniques may be similar in all secondary situations, the management of secondary urban classrooms, often consisting of economically disadvantaged students, can be quite different from other secondary situations.

Student teachers who elect (or who are assigned to) urban student teaching sites often are unprepared for and cannot handle many of the classroom problems they encounter. Poor urban students bring unique problems to the classroom which, if unrecognized by student teachers, can make classroom management very difficult and make student teaching an unpleasant experience.

To be effective and to help ensure a rewarding experience, urban student teachers must be able to identify the problems

their poor urban students bring to the classroom and deal with them in a humane fashion. Urban student teachers need training in the areas of humanistic teaching and urban classroom management before they begin student teaching, because the debilitating conditions in many secondary urban schools may preclude their learning these skills after they begin student teaching.

Even for those who do not student teach in urban sites, it is important to develop urban classroom management skills. Since most teaching vacancies occur in urban schools due to an urban teacher shortage (Haberman, 1987), many new teachers might begin their careers in urban schools.

Humanism in Teaching

Humanistic teaching is pupil-centered. It means recognizing students as individuals, respecting their differences, and trying to help them in their personal, social, emotional, and academic lives (Gunnison, 1976; Lang & Schaller, 1985; Weiner, 1989). Humanistic teaching also means having a sensitivity to the ways of the community from which students come (Goggin & McLeod, 1975). It means treating disadvantaged students with respect, creativity, and skill (Gayles, 1980; Gunnison, 1976; Kapel & Kapel, 1982; Weiner, 1989). In short, it means educating the

whole child (deZutter, 1973; Kapel & Kapel, 1982; Lincoln, 1975; Maeroff, 1988; McGeoch, 1965; Wright, 1981).

If secondary urban student teachers understand the lives of their economically disadvantaged students, they may be more sensitive to their problems. This knowledge and sensitivity may help them respond appropriately to the individual needs of their students and avoid overreacting or reacting improperly when confronted with problems.

This article will describe some of the problems which economically disadvantaged urban students bring to the high school classroom and with which urban student teachers must deal. It also will offer some humanistic strategies to effectively manage urban high school classrooms. If urban high school student teachers have a rewarding experience, they may be more willing to seek employment in secondary urban schools, thus helping to alleviate a chronic urban teacher shortage.

Issues in Urban Teaching

The issues which differentiate an urban high school and a suburban high school classroom are not manifested in the students' day-to-day classroom behaviors. On that level, the problems of classroom management and the strategies to handle them

are similar. Cheating, talking without permission, interrupting others, leaving seats without permission, making wisecracks, and general fooling around are some of the student behaviors which both urban and suburban student teachers face daily.

More serious issues such as direct defiance of a teacher's authority and actual classroom violence, though they exist in suburban high schools, are more prevalent in urban high schools, in part because of large number of students and over-crowded classrooms. The real difference between urban and suburban high school classroom management, however, rests with events happening outside the classroom.

The personal lives of poor urban high school students often create additional classroom problems. Their personal lives affect their classroom attitudes and behavior, and create classroom management problems that are not usually found in suburban high schools. Poverty, single-parent homes, dysfunctional families, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation are just some of the conditions in the lives of poor urban high school students which may influence their behavior and create some of the specific problems urban student teachers face in managing their high school classrooms.

Because of poverty, many urban high school students must work. Not only must these students support themselves, but they may also have to contribute portions of their salaries to the support of their families. For those high school students who must work, conflicts often arise between school and job. These conflicts are manifested in chronic absenteeism and/or tardiness, lack of preparation for class, and lack of interest in school and learning.

Many working students, whose full time jobs begin immediately after school, work late into the evening. They often are too tired to do homework when they get home. For them, getting up for school after working until eleven p.m. or midnight is very difficult. It is not surprising that these working students frequently are absent from school. Those who do get up and go to school are often late and usually unprepared for class because their jobs keep them from their studies.

Lack of preparation creates an additional problem for urban high school teachers - to give homework or not. Without completing some portion of each lesson outside the classroom, curricular goals may not be achieved; but if students do not do the assigned homework, curricular goals will not be achieved either. Students

who are unprepared for class are usually uninvolved in classroom activities. Boredom may set in and these students may become discipline problems. Should a teacher give daily homework and punish those students who do not do it, or not give homework knowing that it might not be done? This seems to be a "no-win" situation for both students and teachers.

Many fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year-old high school students do not live at home with their parent(s). Some live in shelters while others live on their own. Some high school students have been living on their own for two or three years. These students must work full-time for their economic survival. Often these students have no one in their lives who cares whether they do their homework or whether they even go to school. After working eight or ten hours, many students find it very difficult to do homework and get up for school the next morning. Often, the only choice for a working high school student is going to school unprepared, and suffering the consequences, or missing school. When their work schedules conflict directly with school, most working students choose their jobs over school. Their financial survival takes priority over school.

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Some urban high school students have families of their own which they must support. An expectant mother may miss school frequently due to pregnancy-related illnesses. A young parent may not have slept the previous night because his/her child was up sick all night, or a parent had to work immediately after school until late into the evening and was too exhausted to study after work. Maybe he/she worked a double shift and finished work just as school was beginning. Married students may have quarreled with their spouses and were too upset to concentrate on school work. Students who are unprepared for class, who can't stay awake in class, or who are habitually tardy and/or absent from class may have valid reasons. Family obligations demand their time and attention.

Whether they live at home or in shelters, many students do not have their own desks or other suitable study locations. A lack of privacy and constant distractions at home or at the shelters often prevent students from doing homework. Disagreements and arguments among family members or other shelter residents often lead to noisy confrontations which leave some students upset throughout the night. Gangs, drugs, and violence in

poor urban neighborhoods are other distractions in the lives of some poor urban students.

In many poor urban homes, there are no dictionaries, encyclopedias, or other resource books available to students. Work, family obligations, or transportation problems prevent students from staying after school to use the school's library. It may simply be too dangerous for some students to leave their homes after dark to use public libraries. Fear of gang violence after dark may force many urban students to stay home.

In addition to the lack of financial support from their families, some students also lack academic support. Many poor urban minority parents themselves do not read or speak English. They are unable to help their children with their studies and thus they may not encourage them to read or study on their own. In many homes there are few books, newspapers, or magazines. Also, some economically disadvantaged parents may see very little value in education, so they do not encourage their children to strive for academic success.

Some poor urban high school students are from single-parent homes where the mother works while her children are home. Because

there is no parent at home to provide academic encouragement and guidance, many students neglect their studies.

These are valid reasons why some poor urban students are often unprepared or cannot complete their homework assignments or out-of-school projects. Lack of familial support, both financially and academically, often translates into students whose academic achievement is substantially below grade level and who cannot meet either the teachers' expectations or curricular goals.

Many poor urban minority high school students live in what Wright (1981) calls a "vicious cycle of failure." These students see very few examples of success in their lives (Maeroff, 1988). As a result, they feel powerless to change their own situations. This creates low self-esteem. To them, school offers no deliverance from this condition, but may even compound feelings of inadequacy by adding more failure to their lives. This added failure damages an already low self-esteem. Poor urban minority high school students may believe that they are not capable of achieving success, thus perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Motivating poor urban minority high school students with low self-esteem to strive for academic excellence is a serious challenge for student teachers. The lives of poor urban minority high

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school students, which are often very unstable, are filled with conflicts at home and in the community. They meet rejection at almost every turn. As a result they see little value in education. These feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness often lead to a lack of respect for themselves and hostility toward school and teachers.

Many poor urban high school students with academic potential might not take the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) because they cannot afford college. Many poor urban minority high school students believe that even if they did graduate from college, they would not get the high paying jobs because they would have to compete against white middle-class candidates. In other cases, poor urban students simply cannot afford the cost of the SAT, or they feel they cannot afford to miss work to take the test. Some who have children cannot afford child care during a Saturday morning SAT. The application fees associated with applying to college may be prohibitive. In addition to not being able to afford the cost of college tuition, some feel that they would meet with the same type of failure in college that they face in high school. Therefore, taking the SAT is a waste of their time and money.

These are some of the ways that the reality of urban life manifests itself in the classroom. Urban student teachers must learn how to deal with these problems if they are to effectively manage an urban high school classroom.

Effective Strategies

Though classroom teachers may not be able to change the home and family conditions of their students, they can deal with some of the other problems created by the conditions in their students' personal lives. Knowing the adversities faced by poor urban high school students is the first step student teachers can take. Student teachers can act in ways that are sensitive to the realities in their students' lives.

Low self-esteem and lack of motivation in poor urban students are conditions over which classroom teachers do have some control. To deal effectively with these issues, student teachers must go that extra distance to help build their students' self-confidence. Student teachers must try to make poor urban students feel good about themselves through compliments and words of encouragement, not only on their academic performance but also on a personal level. Students will feel good about themselves if a teacher tells them that they themselves are good, not just that

their school work is good. By taking an interest in the personal lives of the students through inquiring about their girlfriends or boyfriends, their spouses, their children, and their jobs, a student teacher adds to students' self-esteem. Complimenting poor urban students on their artistic, musical, or athletic talents also goes a long way toward building students' self-esteem.

Student teachers should help poor high school students take pride in themselves by helping them take pride in their school work. By displaying students' art work, woodworking, and other projects for the whole school to see, or by publishing their writing and/or art work in a literary magazine, student teachers help students take pride in themselves.

Confidence-building techniques such as encouraging students to try and rewarding them with extra credit or points on their average will go a long way toward building self-confidence and motivation. By commenting positively on their written work and oral responses, student teachers can help build student confidence. Even when student work is substandard, a student teacher can build student confidence by finding some aspect of the student's work to compliment. Though the product may be poor, a

student teacher can usually compliment the effort that went into an assignment.

A student teacher must go that extra step to help his/her students achieve personal and academic success. A student teacher may have to work extra hard to help poor urban students succeed at reading and understanding Shakespeare, algebra, or the causes of the Revolutionary War. Student teachers must not only tell their poor urban high school students that they can do it, they must show them that they can do it. This requires a great deal of extra time and effort on the student teacher's part. The student teacher may have to progress through content material at a very slow pace, and segment difficult tasks into smaller components. By designing cooperative learning projects which require the combined efforts of the whole group to solve problems, students may learn that they can work together successfully to accomplish common goals, thus building their self-confidence.

Though a student failed to follow directions or did the wrong assignment, the student teacher should give credit for what the student accomplished while reminding him/her of the importance of listening to and then following directions. Rather than criticize or punish the student for not following directions or

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for doing the wrong assignment, the student teacher should allow him/her another opportunity to do the original assignment. The fact that an academic task was done correctly may be more important than the fact that the student did the assignment differently or even did the wrong assignment.

Student teachers should try to involve students in learning as much as possible. By asking students to corroborate textbooks through personal experience or first-hand knowledge, a teacher builds a sense of worth and self-esteem. Students may find enjoyment in learning and be encouraged to excel academically when they are personally involved in the teaching/learning process. African-American students may be able to help the middle-class white student teacher understand the significance of the contributions of African-Americans in history and science. By allowing students to research minority individuals not mentioned in texts, or by supplementing the textbook with ancillary material, student teachers will encourage students to pursue academic excellence.

Relating instruction to students' lives is another effective technique for managing an urban high school classroom. Students should be allowed to write about personal experiences such as life on their own, or in a shelter, or as a young parent. Stu-

dents should be allowed to deviate from the text to research aspects of their heritages. These are all effective strategies to help manage an urban high school classroom.

Student teachers who understand the personal problems of their students will allow their students extra time to complete homework assignments and outside projects. Because urban high school students often have valid reasons for not completing a homework assignment on time, student teachers should be willing to extend deadlines. If students know that with a valid reason, they will not be penalized for turning in an assignment late, perhaps they will not give up, but will try to complete it. After all, as college students, student teachers knew that they usually had an additional semester to complete a course requirement without penalty.

In addition to giving students more time to complete homework or outside projects, other strategies include: allowing students class time to start and even complete portions of homework assignments; doing portions of outside projects in class; and assigning outside projects in small units. When giving a homework assignment, teachers might consider spreading it over two or three days.

Students may not always have valid reasons for being unable to complete assignments. Some lazy or careless students may try to take advantage of a student teacher's willingness to accommodate students. Therefore, it is important for student teachers to know their students. If a student teacher knows that a student must work or has family obligations after school, he/she may be more understanding when the student is not prepared for class.

When disciplining a student, student teachers should not pull rank. Student teachers should not yell or confront a student with accusations of misbehavior. The lives of many poor urban students are filled with yelling and confrontations. Most won't back down when a teacher yells at them, but instead will yell right back. Student teachers should talk with students, explain the rules that were broken and the consequences. Not only should student teachers explain the immediate consequences such as detention or suspension, but also the long-term consequences which affect the students' futures. The student should be allowed to decide whether to stop the inappropriate behavior or to suffer the consequences. Empower the students, allow them to make decisions about their education.

Treating students with respect is one way of getting them to respect themselves - and others. The golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, should be practiced in the classroom. By reversing roles and asking students how they would like to be interrupted and otherwise treated without respect is a method of dealing with the lack of respect that some student might have toward teachers and peers in the classroom.

By acknowledging and accepting the fact that there are things in the lives of their students which are much more important to them than school, student teachers may avoid overreacting when a student has failed to turn in an assignment, is unprepared for class, or is chronically tardy or absent.

Finally, student teachers should be excited, not afraid, about teaching poor urban high school students. If student teachers take a humanistic approach to teaching poor urban high school students and treat them with respect, many will respond in positive ways.

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